

07 – It is a matter of the heart – do you understand?

Scripture reading: Mark 7:1-8:26.

I. Shortsightedness: blinded by tradition (7:1-13):

- A. Jesus' Pharisaic opponents (v. 1):
 1. The Pharisaic movement of first century Palestine endeavoured to present an orthodox response to the threats to the integrity of post-exilic Judaism
 2. They were popular among the Jews due to their strict observance of religion and their ability to translate the intricacies of Judaism into the practical daily lives of ordinary people.
 3. Jesus' opponents were not local Galileans but they were from Jerusalem, the epicenter of Jerusalem.
 4. The phrase "gathered to Jesus" (συνάγονται πρὸς αὐτὸν) denotes that the opponents were intentionally assessing him or probing for weaknesses.
- B. Jesus' disciples violated the tradition of mealtime handwashing (7:2):
 1. Rather than verifying Jesus' miracles or mulling over his teachings, the opponents zoomed in on the fact that some of Jesus' disciples did not practice the tradition of handwashing before meals.
 2. On a side note, the need to explain that the term "defiled" means "unwashed" points to an audience unfamiliar with Jewish customs.
- C. Mark's parenthetical explanation of Jewish tradition (7:3-4):
 1. The need to explain the Jewish tradition of handwashing indicates that Mark's audience was mainly Gentile.
 2. Torah specification for ritual handwashing (and foot-washing):
 - a. Required for priests before entering the tabernacle (Exod. 30:19).
 - b. Required when there is contact with bodily discharge (Lev. 15:11).
 3. The rabbinic specification for the ritual of handwashing:
 - a. Oral tradition was developed as a "fence around the Torah" (*m. Avot* 3:14); Pharisees considered the oral tradition as equally authoritative as the Torah (Josephus, *Ant.* 13.297b).
 - b. The Mishnah specifies how much water one should use pour onto the hands (the amount held in *cupped hands*),¹ the kind of water containers, quality of water, who may act as the "pourer," whether one may pour onto one hand at a time or both hands together, etc. (*m. Yad.*).

¹ Follow the debate on the meaning of πυγμή (lit. "fist") in Mark 7:3 in Stephen M. Reynolds, "Pygmē (Mark 7:3) as cupped hand," *JBL* 85, no. 1 (March 1966): 87-88. See also Robert A. Guelich, *Mark 1-8:26*, WBC 34A (Dallas: Word, 1989), 361.

- D. The Pharisees and the scribes confront Jesus (7:5):
1. Seeing an opening, the opponents confronted Jesus as to why his disciples do not walk (περπατοῦσιν) according to the traditions of the elders.
 2. The Greek word περπατοῦσιν is the equivalent of the Hebrew term הלכה (*halakha*, “walk/law”), which betrays the opponents’ misguided elevation of the tradition of the elders to a status equal in weight to the Torah.
 3. Holiness, in the eyes of the opponents, is defined by maintaining ritual purity.
 4. The challenge to Jesus is this: how can Jesus pass himself off as a holy man if he allows such irreverence among his band of followers?
- E. Jesus exposes the hypocrisy of tradition trumping God’s Torah (7:6-8):
1. Hypocrisy (ὑποκριτής):
 - a. Refers to a stage actor who wears masks.
 - b. Jesus was not accusing the Pharisees of not being earnest in their pursuit; but their obsession with external observance (lip service) rather than internal conviction (hearts are far from God), or, in other words, form for substance.²
 2. The quotation of Isaiah 29:13:
 - a. The context of the Isaiah verse is God’s oracle condemning the spiritual condition of Jerusalem who kept man-made commandments but only paid lip service to God’s commandment.
 - b. The Isaiah oracle is given just before the Assyrian invasion in 701 BCE, the quote here in Mark 7:6b-7 “foreshadows Jesus’ condemnation of the temple and warning of its destruction in Mark 11:15-17.”³
 - c. This is ominous of the wholesale judgment on the rabbinic tradition represented by his present opponents – the Temple delegates.
 3. Jesus’ verdict on his opponents (Mark 7:8):
 - a. By elevating man-made tradition, the Pharisees had, in effect, moved away (ἀφέντες, “leave”) from God’s commandment.
 - b. Their culpability “amounted to substituting the traditions of human beings for God’s word.”⁴
- F. The illustration of hypocrisy in the tradition of *Corban* (7:9-13):
1. Jesus intensifies his accusation of Pharisaic hypocrisy (7:9).
 2. Jesus’ concrete example – dishonouring parents (7:10):
 - a. The Exod. 20:12 quote – the Fifth Commandment.

² Or, as James R. Edwards aptly extended the “stage actor” metaphor, the Pharisees “confuse drama with reality,” in *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 209.

³ R. Alan Culpepper, *Mark*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2007), 232.

⁴ Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Social-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 225.

- b. The Exod. 21:17 quote – death penalty for those who curse their parents.
 - c. His opponents found fault with his disciples on subsidiary issue, but Jesus went after the Pharisees on matters of paramount importance.
 - d. If Jesus' allegations were true, then the Pharisees had transgressed the Ten Commandments no less and one that carries the death penalty – Jesus had no patience for trivial obscurities.
3. The rabbinic tradition of *Corban* (7:11-12):
- a. “When a son declares his property *Corban*, which at his death would pass into possession of the temple. In the meantime, however, the son retains control over the property – and his control deprives his parents of support that would otherwise have been derived from the property in their old age.”⁵
 - b. For the devious, the *Corban* oath effectively allowed them to absolve themselves from the responsibility to take care of their aged parents.
 - c. For the ignorant, the *Corban* enforcers, such as Jesus' opponents (7:12), would then prevent them from fulfilling their filial duty.
 - d. Those who regretted their oath would be in limbo because the rabbis could not agree on whether the oath could be rescinded.⁶
4. Jesus verdict: the Pharisees were guilty of breaking God's primary law (7:13).
- G. The juxtaposition of the obvious display of God's power in Jesus Christ and the Pharisees' shortsighted squabbling over trivial traditions serve to highlight that the Pharisees were “completely oblivious to the miracles that God is working through Jesus and only notice inconsequential matter.”⁷

II. The true concept of defilement – that which is on the inside (7:14-23):

- A. The clean-unclean parable (7:14-15):
 - 1. The need to hear and understand (7:14; cf. 4:3, 9, 11-13).
 - 2. “There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him” (7:15).
- B. The explanation of the clean-unclean parable (7:16-23):
 - 1. Comparison between 7:16-23 and 4:10-20:
 - a. The disciples come to Jesus to enquire about the parable.
 - b. The public heard only the parable but the disciples received Jesus' private explanation.
 - c. “Then are you also without understanding?” (7:18a; cf. 4:13).

⁵ Edwards, *Mark*, 210.

⁶ Guelich, *Mark 1-8:26*, 369-370.

⁷ David E. Garland, *Mark*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 271.

2. Food is just food – it may cause one to be ceremonial unclean but not morally unclean; the latter is more important than the former (7:18b-19).
3. The cause of moral defilement is the content of the human heart (7:20-23).

III. The Syrophenician woman: A true Gentile Israelite (7:24-30):

- A. Going into Tyre and Sidon (7:24):
 1. Tyre and Sidon were Gentile territories situated northwest of Galilee.
 2. Tyre (formerly Phoenicia) was the homeland of Jezebel (1 Kgs. 16:31-32).
 3. Tyre and Sidon fought against the Jews in the 2nd cent. BCE (1 Macc. 5:15ff).
 4. Josephus: “[The Tyrians are] notoriously our bitterest enemies” (*Ag. Ap.* 1.13).
 5. Jesus’ visit to Tyre and Sidon shows that the Messiah’s reach is not bounded by geography, ethnicity, gender, and religious background.⁸
- B. The Syrophenician woman (Mark 7:25-26):
 1. She “fell at his feet... begged him” to heal her daughter reminds the readers of Jairus who also “fell at his feet... begged him” to heal his daughter (cf. 5:22-23).
 2. The difference between the Syrophenician woman and Jairus:
 - a. Jairus was a highly-respected religious Jewish man; the Syrophenician woman is an unknown Gentile woman from a pagan background.
 - b. Jairus is from Galilee while the Syrophenician woman is from Lebanon.
 - c. Jairus is named while the Syrophenician woman is unnamed.
 3. Access to Jesus Christ is equal to both the haves and the have-nots.
- C. The conversation (7:27-28):
 1. Dog:
 - a. The term “dog” is overwhelmingly pejorative in the Biblical corpus (Exod. 22:31; 1 Sam. 24:15; Isa. 56:10; Matt. 7:6; Luke 16:21; Phil. 3:2).
 - b. Yet, the term used here is *κυνάριον*, meaning, a little dog or a house dog.
 2. The conversation:
 - a. In Jewish thought-world, the Israelites were the children while the Gentiles were, at best, pets in God’s household economy.
 - b. Thus, the issue at hand was not whether Gentiles could have access to God’s grace but how did their access relate to that of the Jews.
 - c. In the present context, the Messiah’s mission was for Israel.
 - d. The woman’s reply indicated that she accepted that Israel had priority but she believed that the superabundance of the Messiah would provide a surplus also for the Gentiles.
 - e. Her insight into the Messiah certainly surpassed those of the Jews that Jesus had met thus far.

⁸ Edwards, *Mark*, 217.

- D. The aftermath (7:29-30):
1. The woman is the first person in Mark's Gospel who fully understood a parable of Jesus – she heard, understood, and applied with faith.
 2. Jesus' word in 7:27, "eat all they want (NIV)" (χορτάζω) is used two other times in Mark – the feeding of the five thousand (6:42) and the subsequent feeding of the four thousand (8:8) – which points to the superabundant surplus of the Messiah which grants Jews and Gentiles equal access to the grace of God.
 3. Wholesomeness came upon the ceremonially unclean woman and her daughter because her heart was pure.

IV. At Decapolis: Healing a man who was deaf (7:31-37):

- A. Return to the Decapolis (7:31):
1. Jesus' first visit to the Decapolis was opposed by the locals due to the economic devastation brought about by Jesus healing the demoniac (5:1-20).
 2. Jesus charged the healed man to testify about his healing to his Decapolitan compatriots and the people there were astonished (5:20).
 3. As a result, Jesus' present visit was very well received.
- B. Healing of the man who was deaf (7:32-37):
1. The Isaiah 35 framework:
 - a. The Greek word for "speech impediment" (μαγιάλος) in Mark 7:32 is only found one other time in the Bible – Isaiah 35:5-6: "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy."
 - b. The theme of Isaiah 35 is about the eschatological joy of the arrival of the Day of the LORD that extends even to the dry desert of Lebanon (i.e., Tyre and Sidon) (Isa. 35:1-2).
 - c. The present passage is the fulfillment of Isa. 35:10 where the redeemed of the LORD returned to Zion with singing because the eschatological Redeemer from Zion has come to Lebanon.
 2. Jesus removed the man from the crowd to provide personal attention (7:33a).
 3. It is unclear why Jesus uses his spit although this may have to do with the Jewish thinking that spittle is unclean (*m. Zavim* 1-5) and he wanted to demonstrate that his spittle brings healing.
 4. The man's ears were opened and the "chains" (δεσμός) of his tongue was released (7:35).
 5. Jesus' charge of silence was ignored, just as it was ignored at Galilee (1:45) – there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles in terms of their astonishment at Christ and also their inability to obey him (7:36-37).

V. The feeding of the four thousand (8:1-10):

- A. The similarities between the feeding of the four thousand and the feeding of the five thousand (6:30-44):
1. Both narratives occurred in the wilderness (6:35; 8:4).
 2. Jesus had compassion for the people (6:34; 8:2).
 3. The disciples were bewildered by Jesus' command (6:37b; 8:4).
 4. Jesus asked the disciples how many loaves they have (6:38; 8:5).
 5. They have far too few loaves and fish (6:38b; 8:5b, 7).
 6. Both crowds were directed to sit down for the feast (6:39; 8:6).
 7. Jesus gave thanks, broke the bread, and gave the pieces to the disciples to distribute to the crowd (6:41; 8:6).
 8. They ate and were all satisfied (χορτάζω) (6:42; 8:8).
 9. There were thousands of people (6:44; 8:9a).
 10. Jesus had to dismiss the crowd (6:45b; 8:9).
 11. The disciples set out on a boat (6:45a; 8:10).
- B. The differences between the feeding of the two feeding episodes:
1. The five thousand were Jewish; the four thousand were Gentiles.
 2. The five thousand were men; the four thousand included everyone.
 3. The five thousand had a militaristic flavour; the four thousand did not.
 4. The disciples took initiative with the five thousand; Jesus took initiative with the four thousand.
 5. The five thousand were fed with five loaves and two fish with twelve baskets surplus; the four thousand were fed with seven loaves and some fish with seven baskets surplus.
- C. Jesus performed the same miracle for both the Jews and the far-off Gentiles who were with him for three days (cf. 8:3).

VI. Misunderstanding the leaven of the Pharisees and Herod (8:11-21):

- A. The Pharisees came to discredit Jesus (8:11-13):
1. Returning to the Holy Land (Dalmanutha; probably Magadan),⁹ the Pharisees came out to discredit Jesus by demanding a sign from heaven (8:11).
 2. *Sigh deeply in his spirit* denotes that Jesus had had enough with the disbelieving and unrepentant Pharisees (8:12a).
 3. *This generation* recalls the corrupt generation of Noah (Gen. 7:1) and the stiff-necked generation in the wilderness (Ps. 95:10-11; Exod. 33:5) (Mark 8:12b).

⁹ See Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), 81.

4. Their unbelief drove Jesus away from them (8:13).
- B. Warning against the leaven of the Pharisees and Herod Antipas (8:14-21):
 1. Although the Pharisees and the Herodians had very little in common, they were both united in their opposition of Jesus Christ due to unbelief (8:15; cf. 3:6).
 2. However, the disciples did not understand Jesus and thought it was because they did not bring enough bread with them (8:14, 16).
 3. Jesus fired a barrage of questions: “Why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up? ... And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up? ... Do you not yet understand?” (8:17-21).
 4. Although the disciples knew the facts of the miracles, but they had not come to understand exactly who Jesus really was.

VII. Progressively seeing everything clearly (8:22-26):

- A. Arriving at Bethsaida (cf. 6:45, 53!), the people brought a blind man to Jesus (8:22).
- B. Mark uses eight different Greek words to say “seeing”/“sight” in 8:23-25.
- C. Jesus’ question to the blind man, “Do you see anything” (8:23) corresponds with Jesus’ question to his disciples en route to Bethsaida, “Do you still not see?” (8:21).
- D. This episode is probably meant to be “a clue that the lingering blindness of the disciples may also be relieved... by the continued touch of Jesus.”¹⁰
- E. The two stages of healing probably point to the progressive nature of the gaining of sight (understanding) into the mysteries of Christ by continuous contact with him.
- F. This episode of the blind man in Bethsaida parallels that of the deaf man in Decapolis – that which the Messiah do for the Gentiles, he would also do for the Jews.

VIII. Conclusion:

- A. Tradition, helpful as they may be, must not distract us from what God is doing today.
- B. Focus on the most important things (heart matters) – do not major in the minors.
- C. There are no by-default outsiders to the kingdom; all who are of faith are insiders.
- D. Jesus does not discriminate based on ethnicity, gender, or religious background.
- E. We must not be blinded by hard-heartedness but be always open to Christ “touching” our lives so that we may progressively know him more and more.

¹⁰ Edwards, *Mark*, 241.